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Rog: Struggle in the City

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After being empty for more than a decade, the former factory complex Rog was occupied and opened at the end of March 2006. As a result of the occupation, several individuals and groups injected life into this new space for cultural, artistic, social and political production. It was initially intended as a short, temporary, spatial intervention in the city of Ljubljana to oppose the negative effects of privatization and denationalization – and the subsequent disappearance of public spaces – and to articulate new cultural policies in the city. The creation of a new autonomous cultural production centre was a response to the ever-tightening control over cultural production (in private as well as public institutions – catholic, commercial and government) and thus over the production of political subjectivities. It was also a response to the difficulties encountered in moving from a paradigm of material production to one of immaterial production (leaving many arts and culture producers without spaces or institutions). The occupation of Rog was declared to be temporary, and temporary use was its defining concept. The occupation took place in the context of economic and social changes, with a lot of empty former factories

(former sites of mass industrial production), a great deal of unemployment and a sizable precarious cognitariat. The temporary use of Rog was intended to spark debate throughout the city and provoke discussion on cultural policies and the conditions of production of the cognitariat. The level of conflict in this debate was not clear, and varied during the existence of Rog. At the time of writing, there is a high level of conflict – much higher than a year ago, when the negotiations between the community of users and the city administration were abruptly terminated by the city Mayor. After an unsuccessful eviction attempt, the Mayor's current position is to keep Rog under strict municipal surveillance.

Rog as generational event

Rog has been a generational experience. It started as a practical attempt to break away from the conceptual, practical and political hegemony of the generation that was in power since 1980's. On both the right and the left of politics, in the inner circles of the ruling Communist party, in the growing nationalist milieu and in the new social movements, the concept of civil society had become the hegemonic concept of the 80s. The struggle over the interpretation of this concept ended with the triumph of the bourgeois notion of civil society: the separation of politics and the economy, where the rule of capitalist market logic over the economy and political autonomy were seen as a guarantee of the integration of society into the global market. This hegemony was sealed with the Hegelian order that determined the relationship between civil society and the state. Civil society had become the sphere of realization for the idea of the state – hierarchical integration into the global market. The discourse around rights was based on the assumption that rights are granted, thus blocking the possibility of producing them. The production of life became

impossible outside of unilateral capitalist control. Alternative forms of production of life were only tolerated as exceptions. This resulted in practices of localized resistance, identity politics and verticality in relation to the state. Notions of alternative culture, lifestyles, identities and minorities were incorporated into the system of multiculturalism, which allows some specific expressions of difference without endangering the machine of the social reproduction of capital. The civil society institutions set up in the 1980's became the tolerated institutions of leftist neoliberal multiculturalism.

The enormous energy and self-confidence of the spectrum of subjectivities of the 80's have scattered and faded, especially in the face of the extreme, tragic consequences of the disintegration of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. One of the rare expressions of autonomous desire and social antagonism that survived the transition without losing its autonomy and rebellious spirit was the occupation and reanimation of the former Yugoslav military barracks, Metelkova, in 1993. This huge complex in the center of Ljubljana soon became a center of cultural and social dissent, a factory of alternative production of subjectivities.

By the end of the nineties, the transition had almost been accomplished, with the economy fully integrated and conflict successfully delegated. On entering the European Union and NATO at the start of the new millennium, Slovenia became a territory of complete imperial articulation. But the development of the new biopolitical regime also produced new antagonistic subjectivities that identified with the new social movement for alternative globalization. The new political generation emerging from the global struggles (for freedom of biopolitical production), rooted in experiences like the Zapatista uprising, and the Seattle and Genoa protests, could no longer lean on the institutions of the

movements of the 80s. It found itself operating in a new context of biopolitical production and exploitation, in a regime of restraint and controlled mobility and multiplicity.

The new political generation was also up against the specific characteristics of biopolitical production in former socialist countries, which are determined by the difficulties involved in abandoning the Manchester paradigm of production. Firstly, economic growth is based on hyper-exploitation in traditional terms - extremely long working hours and unpaid overtime. Secondly, economic growth is concentrated in the construction sector, in which huge profits are made from the exploitation of migrant workers in a regime based on dependency and blackmail. Mobility, restrained and controlled through authoritarianism, has become the key to economic growth in Slovenia, while immaterial and cognitive work is accorded little value. Thirdly, there is a huge rate of unemployment and precarisation among highly-educated people. Culture is still largely considered to be a sphere for social reproduction or the sphere where the ruling ideology is produced. The pressure of homogenization and cultural repression is therefore immense.

Reproduced by capital and labor representatives, the Manchester paradigm of production (in which the source of value is produced by quantified labor, that is, hours worked) and "black protectionism" (where decreased national sovereignty is compensated by control over cultural production) defines the context in which the new political generation encountered the cognitariat (who face either capitalist recuperation or repression) and migrant workers (who are subjected to restrained and controlled mobility). New subjectivities, a new order, new conceptions of space and time and, above all, the new articulations of post-Fordist immaterial production and exploitation, demanded

a new node of visibility, exchange and organization. The changing landscape of the city and its outskirts, the loss of the public realm through privatization, the authoritarian management of populations and practices considered problematic by those in power (the poor, migrants, beggars, vagabonds, the Roma people, spaces of autonomous, non-commercial cultural and arts production) and the reduction of diversity to the logic of profit, were all factors demanding a new spatial-political intervention. This was the context in which Rog – which aimed to become an institution of free production that could reappropriate the conditions of biopolitical production, in short, a Common institution – was articulated. Keeping this context in mind makes it possible to understand the paradoxes of the Rog experience.

Opening up and encounters

Rog is about opening up - opening a space for free production for the multitude, to intervene in the process of the privatization of communal property and related acts of corruption. In fact, the former bicycle factory Rog is the symbol of the corruption that privatization entails. It is also the symbol of the difficult transit from Fordism to post-Fordism, from the paradigm of material production to that of immaterial production.

The mass production of bicycles at the Rog factory came to a halt during the process of privatization, restructure and reintegration of society into the global market. This process was conducted as a political attack against the power of workers, and was accomplished through the destruction of their political and economic power. What had been social property was initially nationalized, in order to be privatized or denationalized later. The Rog factory, nationalized after the Second World War and the socialist

revolution, was denationalized and privatized in the beginning of nineties. It was then bought by the municipality of Ljubljana twice. For reasons linked to property speculation, the former factory in the city center remained empty for fifteen years.

The Rog experience is also about encounters. The idea of opening up and revitalizing the space developed in art galleries, among young architects and activists - many of whom were then fighting the most brutal phase of expropriation in the 1990's, which led to 1% of the population being erased from the register of permanent residence. The right-wing parties that had just come to power at the national level were trying to introduce a flat tax, mobilizing against "erased" people and other minorities, and trying to keep a total grip on cultural production. This meant that cultural and social production encountered serious problems accessing funds and spaces. In the city of Ljubljana, power was in the hands of the left, which had no idea what to do with it other than to hand the powerful real estate lobbies what they wanted. In this situation, during the “Swarming of the Multitude” festival, the former factory Rog was occupied and declared open to anybody who needed a space for cultural and social production.

So Rog came to be. Immediately after the occupation, the significance of the newly-opened factory spilled beyond its physical boundaries and the boundaries of the communities directly involved in self-management of the space. The Rog occupation became the generator and testing ground for the changing of production paradigms. For this reason, the occupation was initially supported by many arts and cultural organizations and individuals. Different concepts of the postmodern factory Rog were invested in the newly opened space. The Rog community was perfectly aware of its potential to influence the transformation of production itself - the “becoming” of a new artistic, cultural and social institution.

Therefore, they began with a non-conflict strategy of communication with the owners – the municipality of Ljubljana. It was based on the notion of temporary use and the need for new institutions for arts, cultural and social production, institutions for the valorization of immaterial production. But the discourse of the occupied Rog wasn't just built on the need to set up institutions for the valorization of immaterial and cognitive work. It was also a discourse against its exploitation, through the organization of space. Practices of organization and communication, such as an assembly of users and a decision-making process based on active participation, openness and self-management were set up in order to strengthen a common identity and self-valorization. The idea was to achieve continuity in the forms of organization and communication between the squatted factory (temporarily occupied Rog) and the new public institution of cultural and social production. This meant that temporary use was not only tactic used in a context of extremely unfavorable power relations. It was a mechanism of defense of the public realm through reconstruction into a common space. Therefore, the role of the assembly of temporary users was to ensure that Rog remained open (against the municipality's attempt to evict users), to organize it on the notion of a "commons" (to defend it from attempts at privatization), to demand that the complex remain public and to contribute to the concept of the New Rog, so that the program, activities and forms of self-management produced during the temporary use period would find continuity in the future New Rog.

The project was tolerated for eight months, and then there were municipal elections. The newly elected Mayor was an independent candidate from the left who had been a manager of the Mercator corporation. He promised efficiency and planned to run the city as a corporation, carrying out projects that would allow the seemingly

stagnant city of Ljubljana to make a leap forward. His team included people who promised a change in forms of production and a new style of governance which would take its strength from citizen initiatives.. For a while, it seemed that the Rog project would profit from the dynamism of the new city administration. Negotiations with the city council to legalize the temporary use of the space got under way, and the project for a New Rog was initially opened up to content produced by the temporary users. Then, suddenly and without warning, the city council unilaterally stopped all negotiations, cancelled all agreements and started a process of marginalizing and ghettoizing the temporary users, who were now seen as intruders and squatters. Rog thus became a paradigmatic case of the degeneration of public power - the suspension of democratic, public debate, authoritarian rule by a Mayor and the lack of democracy in public administration. Rog has also become a paradigmatic example of the future evolution of institutions of cultural and social production (immaterial production). The valorization of immaterial production will be organized in an authoritarian way. It's not superfluous to mention that the Mayor of Ljubljana directly applied management practices from the Mercator corporation (commercial sector) to the municipality of Ljubljana and its administration.

Important lessons can already be drawn from Rog: what is communal cannot be exploited without being destroyed. This seems to be a very important lesson, keeping in mind the paradoxes and ambiguities that result from the nature of the peripheral economy (as in Slovenia). In peripheral capitalist economies, the struggle for development always has an ambiguous relationship with the struggle against exploitation. While in the 20th century it was possible for the struggle for development to overshadow the struggle against exploitation (with tragic consequences), this seems

impossible in an age of immaterial production. Today, the struggle for development must necessarily be a struggle against exploitation. And the struggle against exploitation must be a struggle for the reappropriation of the conditions of the production of life. Any action that seeks recuperation or integration is doomed to failure. For this reason, the idea of temporary use was at risk of sacrificing the common in favor of capitalist accumulation.

From temporary use to permanent autonomy – the experience of the Rog Social Center

The Rog experience highlights the state of biopolitical conflicts in Ljubljana, which are local articulations of global capitalist processes of biopolitical accumulation and their alternatives. Its boundaries are defined by conflict among public, private and communal interests. The occupation of the former factory Rog by a multitude of cultural, artistic and social producers has clearly raised questions about the possibility of democratizing public spaces (re-making them as common spaces) and about institutions of cultural, artistic and social production at a time when public power is increasingly occupied by the logic of corporate management, and the authoritarian tendencies that this produces are simultaneously strengthened through partnerships with private investors. This reciprocal strengthening of the authoritarian command is called private-public partnership.

In the case of Rog, the Mayor's office expressed indifference to the initiative of a network of independent producers, which implied its indifference towards an original initiative of residents of the city, towards a form of biopolitical participative democracy and thus towards the communal . Meanwhile, the Mayor's office called on private investors for assistance in fighting this form of basic

participation. Against the shared space of artistic, cultural and social production, the Mayor's office drew up a plan for a contemporary art institution that was to be built as part of a private-public partnership. In this way, the council intends to impose the first arts institution in the country to be defined by the subordination of the public interest to corporate logic and private business interests. It is important to highlight the new scenario of class struggle that arises when immaterial (cultural, artistic and affective) labor is harnessed into the regime of capitalist accumulation. In this scenario, it becomes necessary to address issues to do with the relationship between freedom, creativity and discipline, and the relationship between eventuality, singularity and the unilateralism of capitalist valorization. This also applies to the issue of the subjectivities of immaterial work and their relationship to institutions and public power – in the light of the struggle for a common, against the unilateralism of capital.

Rog reveals the local political and administrative articulations of imperial rule. These are similarly revealed in the area of schools, universities and research, where it is possible to trace a similar convergence between the public and the private, and the emergence of an antagonist, constituent common. The complete integration of social life into the regime of biopolitical exploitation can also be seen in many other dynamics: the pressure to gentrify, the normalization of public space and the process of deconstruction and reconstitution of borders, which are projected into urban centers where the new mechanisms of discrimination that sustain the imperial apparatus are defined.

The driving force behind the Rog Social Center was the indifference of the city council. The attempt to become subversively integrated into the new cycle and new institutions of cultural, artistic and social production ended with perverse results:

it encouraged private investment in cultural, artistic and social production, gentrification, and a violent attempt by the city council to restrict new productive subjectivities. As it turned out, it was only possible to establish cultural and artistic management in the city by destroying the common project, destroying the forms of organization that collectively reappropriate the conditions of social production and the production of life.

For these reasons, the Rog experience of autonomy spread beyond the walls and boundaries of the social centre. This expansion was the only possible response to the crisis. The municipality's attack on the users of Rog and the practices of free organization of immaterial production pushed Rog into the frontline of the struggle against forms of domination and exploitation based on expropriation of the common and privatization of the conditions of social production. For this reason, the political work achieved the Social Center's incredible power to communicate social conflicts and translate them to different contexts. The shared space for encounters, convergence and hybridity among the multitude (migrant workers, sans papier, asylum seekers, precarious workers, militants) have made it possible to articulate the overall spectrum of imperial dominance in post-Fordist and post-national cities, together with a common spectrum of struggle and counter-power.

Encounter, convergence and hybridity give meaning to the experience of autonomy and biosyndicalism. The Rog Social Center offers a truly new experience in comparison to the social movements of the previous generation in Ljubljana. The project is based on a critique of the segmentation and verticality of civil society/the state, identity politics and the independent cultural centers that have traditionally protected islands of difference. Social Centers
are a mechanism of alternative subjectivation in expansion.

The Rog Social Center takes on a clear position in the debate about spaces of alternative subjectivation. It rejects integration into the city-enterprise that sees cultural and social productivity as a potentially profitable production of subjectivities. Given the inherent relationship that exists between attempts to harness spaces or forms of immaterial production and processes of normalization, individualization, the destruction of memory and social networks and the expropriation of the commons, the only possible option is to take an anti-integration stance. On the other hand, the Rog Social Center also rejects the status of exceptionality, which is used by the politics of difference to legitimate the existence of alternative spaces as a kind of reserve for minorities within society. The Social Centre is trying to initiate a process of political recomposition in the city, based on bringing to light and communicating the struggles of precarious cognitive workers, migrant workers, sans papier and asylum seekers against institutions and mechanisms of control.

The extreme precarity of Rog itself, which is struggling against the municipality's attempts to stifle it, offers an opportunity to understand conditions that are common to precarious institutions. The self-organized militant researchers, asylum seekers, sans papier and migrant workers who are injecting life into the Social Center are experiencing new ways of doing politics in post-national and post-Fordist conditions. From the point of view of the Social Center's practices, those conditions could be defined as:

1. *The deconstruction and reconstitution of the right to territory*. The Social Center tries to go beyond the modern dichotomy between individualism and communitarianism. In Slovenia, this dichotomy has been decisive for the constitution of two political blocs. While the so-called left followed the path of liberal individualism and produced a discourse of rights that legitimates privatization and

neo-liberal accumulation while advocating human and minority rights as a lever for integration, the nationalist and racist right uses the discourse of exclusive ethno-nationalist communitarianism. The movement against authoritarian management and control of migration that has been "territorialized" in the Social Center articulates another way to claim the right to territory –through an attempt to build a community on the border (a border that is extrapolated in the metropolis as the border of the political and the constitution of citizenship) as a common struggle against the society of control. This struggle against exploitation is the struggle against borders as institutions that restrict mobility and multiplicity in accordance with the unilateralism of capitalist command.

2. *The crisis of representative politics*. The lion is no longer in its cage. We believe it is in the Social Centre. Representative politics can no longer claim the exclusivity of representing and organizing interests. Institutions and modes of governability that criss-cross constitutional political orders have become decisive. Social Centers are an intervention and construction against the latter. The transformations taking place in the city are turning all the parameters of modern politics upside down. The hierarchically inclusive heterogeneity of citizenship presents us with the challenge of self-valorizing citizenship practices as an alternative to formal citizenship. The crisis of the system of representation involving major labor and capital interests (in Slovenia it is the crisis of the neo-corporative model of overcoming conflict) offers us the opportunity to invent new forms of struggle against the political constitution of wage labor, which is moving towards an extreme form of precarisation. New forms of biosyndicalism seem to offer the first forms arising from the rejection of the paternalism of the "social partnership" and of discovering the joy of class

struggle as a struggle against work and the social reproduction of capital. The crisis of representative politics is also reflected in the crisis of civil society organized into non governmental organizations that advocate human and/as minority rights. Social Center is laboratory of global citizenship, space of convergence, hybridity and empowerment, in which new form of self-organization of asylum seekers who had previously always been represented by NGOs took place. Ultimately, the important thing is the transformation of political subjectivity that is taking place in the Social Center. There has been a complete rearticulation of the relationship between the social (economic) and political struggle. The struggle for control over the conditions of the production of life is both social and political. Theory is not external to movements and parties: it is inherent to social movements as the ability to self-translate and conceptualize radical subjectivity and new objects of attack – theory as an arm of the movement.

To conclude. Rog is not a utopian space. Rog is a site of struggle in the city. It seems to find itself at the frontline that is being drawn by the transformations taking place in the city: new forms of governability defined as institutions and modes of control over mobility and multiplicity, a new articulation of the public-private relationship, new frontiers of exploitation and enclosure as forms of expropriation of the Common and the crisis of representative politics and of the modern dichotomies that had defined political subjectivity. It's difficult to say how the story will end. It started accidentally, as the result of wonderful encounter. It was an attempt to intervene and construct something in the city at a point when the first phase of privatization and social change had been achieved, and the second had been declared – the transformation of the public sector, with a new political make up of immaterial labor and the flexibilization of labor, which implies the precarisation of

wage labor, as forms of control over the mobility of labor. Then things moved very quickly. The public-private relationship was articulated in new forms of governability. The new Mayor and city administration imposed authoritarian management of the city of Ljubljana, quickly transforming it into a business enterprise. Cultural politics in the city and the country became oriented towards the accumulation and exploitation of the last bastions of immaterial production that had been spared privatization so far – artistic and cultural production that was seen as a public asset and had achieved a high degree of autonomy. The funding crisis and growing uncertainty of spaces for cultural production went hand-in-hand with gentrification and normalization. The generation of "alternative culture" that has existed in the city center since the seventies is in danger of disappearing. It has found itself trapped between either accepting integration or/and taking on the role of an exceptional, limited reserve of difference in the city. Rog Factory and Rog Social Center are committed to continuing to produce new forms of political subjectivities capable of subverting the new forms of governability in the Ljubljana-enterprise.

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